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III.

GARRISON.

MR. GARRISON began, inspired, and largely controlled the movement which put an end to negro slavery in the United States. This fixes his place in history.

There had been, before the Revolution, tracts printed and individual protests made against the system. The Quakers and Covenanters never ceased their testimonies ; and the Methodists spoke brave words—not much heeded, as they were only words, and often spoken by men who continued slaveholders. The Conventions which formed the State Constitutions, and those which adopted them, discussed it. That which framed the United States Constitution gave it a very exhaustive examination. Before and during the war of 1812 it again attracted public attention ; and, in 1819, the time of the Missouri Compromise, the antagonism of the two sections, slave and free, nearly broke the Union.

But no man or Church proposed, much less set on foot, any plan or movement for its abolition. Each and all seemed confounded and disheartened at the complexity of the problem and the vast work. There was the most entire ignorance and apathy on the slave question. If men knew of the existence of slavery, it was only as a part of picturesque Virginia life. No one preached, no one talked, no one wrote about it. No whisper of it stirred the surface of the political sea. The Church heard of it occasionally, when some colonization agent asked funds to send blacks to Africa. Old school-books tainted with antislavery selections had passed out of use, and new ones were compiled to suit the times. If any dissent from the prevailing faith appeared, every one set himself to crush it. The pulpit preached at it, the press denounced it, mobs tore down houses, threw presses into the fire and the stream, and shot editors ; religious conventions tried to smother it, parties arrayed themselves

against it. The great leaders Webster, Benton, and Clay, in solemn and set phrase, pledged themselves to keep silent respecting it. For Garrison's first antislavery lecture in Boston, in 1830, no church could be had; the only building that could be procured was a hall used by the followers of Abner Kneeland, who called themselves infidels. Equally honorable to both sides, infidels and the young abolitionists, was his frank declaration, without protest from that generous roof, that "no power but Christianity could destroy slavery."

Mr. Garrison first organized a movement specially and solely devoted to the abolition of slavery. He first announced a plan—immediate and unconditional emancipation on the soil—the only proposition which would ever have attracted public attention and supported an agitation capable of effecting a settlement of the question. He searched out the means which could help to that result, combined and marshaled them to efficient action, and finally accomplished his purpose.

His life was given to this work. Declaring that his reliance was wholly on moral means—the agitation and discussion of the right of slavery—he tested everything by reference to this self-evident principle: a man's right to himself. By this he tried Church and State, sects and parties, and individual leaders; every man, or organization, which doubted, or denied, or opposed, this self-evident principle he denounced as intellectually blind or morally rotten.

The exact amount of sin each one was guilty of in God's sight depended on his birth, training, and light. This he did not undertake to settle. But any general and continued denial of self-evident truth he counted as moral delinquency.

The Constitution, whose cement was an agreement to keep millions in chains, he denounced as a "covenant with death and an agreement with hell." The party which, under our Declaration of Independence, held power by silence and complicity with such oppression, he rated as hypocrites; as laying down for others a rule against which they would themselves indignantly rebel. The Church, which sanctioned the denial of marriage, education, and the Bible to these victims, and their sale on the auction-block, he pronounced no Church of Christ, but a synagogue of Satan.

This merciless and incessant criticism, in private and public, by speech and the press—using each event that occurred as text for his exhortation—was his only means of agitation. Though Church and State, college and exchange, two thousand million dollars of

slave property, commerce based on cotton, fashion, wealth, and literature, great leaders and strong parties, were arrayed against him, he appealed only to conscience and the moral sense ; never, in the darkest hour, doubting their omnipotence.

Though the battle-axe did finally break the chain, it was *conscience*, stirred by his appeal and enlightened by his teaching, that provoked the conflict between two civilizations, fought the battles, and enabled the state to abolish slavery.

Never on the antislavery platform was there any criticism of Whig or Democrat, *as such*, but only as each supported slavery. No fault was ever found with Baptist or Methodist, or any sect, except as and when it gave sanction to slavery. Only pro-slavery parties and sects met with any rebuke. Hence, in the first fervor which answered Garrison's appeal, everything sincere in the Church rallied to his side. After ten or twelve years this changed, and, unable to endure his criticism, the Church organizations either wholly withdrew from the movement, or formed societies exclusively of their own members. But the Church showed no real interest in the subject ; the clergymen who remained true to their first pledges were flung from their pulpits, and, more or less formally, disowned by their denominations ; and church-members who made themselves prominent were often excommunicated.

Some have claimed more, and some less, as the share such Church societies had in producing the final result. One thing is evident : but for Mr. Garrison's ten or twelve previous years of agitation, the Church would never have wakened to her duty. And even after 1840 it was mostly because shamed by his exposure of her delinquency, roused by his appeals, and awed by his example, that she persevered in her testimony.

About the same time (1840), some of the floating elements and margins of political organizations attempted distinct political action, and this half-abortive effort finally culminated, in 1848, in the Free-Soil party, and at last in the Republican party, in 1854, which made no war on slavery itself (except that in the District of Columbia and the Territories), but confined itself to resisting any *extension* of the system. This political party, no doubt, largely aided in creating that public sentiment which enabled the Government to abolish slavery during the war ; and there can nowhere be found an earlier or more generous appreciation, or more flowing eulogy, of these men and their labors than in the columns of Mr. Garrison's journal, "The Liberator."

But Mr. Garrison always kept his movement distinct from this political agitation, and his movement had very great advantages over it. The moment party lines were drawn, the meetings and conventions of each were attended mostly, if not only, by its own members. The mass of mind reached by their speakers was just that which did not need influence or change of opinion. Political agitation is an educational force to only a limited extent. Hampered by the compromises of the Constitution, obliged to conciliate opponents, to keep appeals and arguments within such limits as would secure immediate results—votes—the Republicans could only assail the outworks and abuses of the institution, and even those with bated breath. Such fettered assault effects little when the aim and need are to change entirely public opinion.

Said Governor Chase, of Ohio—afterward our Chief Justice—to the graduating class of Dartmouth, just before the war, “Gentlemen, I will give you a life-long motto : No slavery anywhere.” Enthusiastic applause instantly drowned his voice. “Not yet, gentlemen,” he continued. “Wait a moment. I’ve not finished. No slavery anywhere outside the Slave States !” No applause followed the completed sentence.

When logic stops thus half-way, it makes few converts, and chills all enthusiasm. But this was as far as, under the Constitution, and in the ranks of the Republican party, the speaker could go. Stevens, Wade, Giddings, Lovejoy, Andrew, and Sumner overpassed such limits. But the party held itself responsible for no such rash utterances.

The Garrisonian, on the contrary, gathered all classes and both sides into his meetings. He broke up the fallow ground, appealed fearlessly to first principles—right and wrong—tore parchment contracts to pieces, followed out his self-evident truth to all logical results, kindled enthusiasm and roused the keenest opposition, so that the land rocked with an agitation that went down to primeval depths. As Seward said to me in New York, “Yes, you make opinion, and we use it.”

But the fact which needs to be emphasized, and proves the exact relation between Mr. Garrison and these parties, is this : no matter how much or how little influence is claimed for honest men in the pulpit and earnest men in the parties, there is no dispute that each and all of them were waked to action by Garrison’s summons, and achieved whatever they did achieve by following in the path—immediate abolition—he had opened, and using the method—agitation

—he had proposed. A keen observer says, “Garrison made Lincoln possible.”

The antislavery movement converted these men ; it gave them a constituency; it gave them an opportunity to speak, and it gave them a public to listen. The antislavery agitation gave them their votes, got them their offices, furnished them their facts, and gave them their audiences. If their friends claim that they cherished all these principles in their own breasts before Mr. Garrison appeared, then if the antislavery movement did not furnish them their ideas, it surely gave the courage to utter them. The relation between him and all antislavery statesmen and divines is very much that which George Stephenson, the inventor of locomotives, bears to the engineers on our railway trains. In Wade, Stevens, Sumner, Seward, Jay, Tappan, Beecher, May, Lovejoy, and Bacon, Mr. Garrison created an antislavery purpose and then gave them an efficient method which no one of them ever dreamed of before. Yes, and, considering the fore-front place he held in the constant manufacture of opinion on every phase of the question as it presented itself, it may be truly said that he not only set them in motion, but he also, to a great extent, kept them in motion. Further, in many a critical moment his was the bold, wise, and single-eyed counsel which saved the cause from compromise and shipwreck.

To-day scornful priests say Garrison did nothing. He was only a stumbling-block in the way. His bitterness only hindered the movement, and his criticism of the Church put off success for twenty years. When free speech cost something, and claims for justice angered the nation almost to slaying the speaker, then timid Church and party hid themselves from all responsibility for the agitation, and left Garrisonianism to keep the movement alive. The work done—the tempest over—fair-weather sailors stalk forth to doubt if there were, after all, any storm, or even any rough sea, but what the pilot raised.

Each one of these followers, the moment his blows began to tell, was charged with the same intolerance of judgment and bitterness of speech that Garrison was so universally accused of. Neither Sumner’s rhetoric, nor the extreme caution with which Channing handled the argument, was any shield for them against that accusation. In truth, it was not the manner nor the language that stung the sinner : it was the bare fact that his sin had found him out.

Men who were and are unwilling to give up all for principle, and who seek to buy the name of reformer at half-price, still harp on Garrison’s mood and language. But history shows no such work

ever done unless by an earnestness which seemed to half-hearted men bitter and intolerant. Fox, Luther, Isaiah, and even the Divine Master, could not escape such criticism. "There is a prudent wisdom," says Goethe, "and there is a wisdom which never reminds you of prudence." A truth Swift saw earlier when he said :

"The stupid cant, 'He went too far,' despise,
And learn that to be bold is to be wise."

History will show that neither the fierce Saxon of Fox, nor Isaiah's hallowed lips, nor Luther's lurid denunciation, ever outran the truth, or did anything but good. Show us one efficient reformer who has escaped this charge, before you blame Garrison for what seems an inherent element of human nature and a necessity in human affairs. Our history shows that he was none too bitter, not a whit too earnest, and that in judging his fellow-citizens he only half appreciated their moral dullness.

How slowly and reluctantly they answered his appeal ! All the heed they paid him for a quarter of a century was mobs and hatred. What niggard support they gave him at the very last ! And even in the death-grapple, when, the flag bowing low in peril, selfishness broke the chain, we turned the negro out, after centuries of wrong, ignorant, penniless, naked, without a roof, surrounded by the wealth he had created, and yet left with the ownership only of his bare body ! The shock Garrison is alleged to have given this people—all necessary to stun us, drunk with prejudice, into sobriety—has never yet lifted us to a thoroughly just and honorable mood. Look even to-day at the timid selfishness with which Northern trade and party let the Mississippi be blockaded, the national arm defied, and ten thousand houseless victims, deluded into believing law could protect them, subjected to piteous agony.

You sometimes hear even now some narrow and superficial talker styling Garrison a man "of one idea." Men with their eyes open see that, as Carlyle says, "every road leads to the end of the world." So every great moral question must hold all others within it. No sooner was this question of mere chattel slavery afoot than it opened the way to all others. Toleration of opinion, the limits of authority, the relation of the citizen to the law and to government, the place of the Bible, the sphere of woman, race, layman, and priest, State rights and nationality—all were stirred and became involved. Mr. Garrison shrank from the discussion of none of them. On all he showed the same serene intrepidity, independence, and sagacity, and

the same true conservatism, as in his original crusade. Alive to all, ready for each as it crossed his path, his agitation contributed more than any one force in our time to the strenuous, practical, and fearless discussion of these issues. Whether an abolitionist should be heard in any town; whether his subject should be allowed in the lyceum; whether he himself should be countenanced, even if speaking on a popular theme—these questions taught toleration to common men who never read Locke. New England took at last the freedom of speech which Luther and Calvin had argued for, but which neither they nor most of their followers had dared to use.

It was no flippant bigot, but Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, in 1852, asked Mr. Garrison, “Are you a Christian?” What more is needed to demonstrate how stone-blind were then the best American thought and religion; how absolutely they were shut up to insist on always calling “evil good and good evil,” “putting darkness for light and light for darkness,” and insolently refusing to *test* things by the Master’s touchstone, “their fruits”?

If to-day our atmosphere is largely free from this cant and superstition, if at least ten thousand pulpits would now blush to ask such a question, how much of this breadth, clear sight, and toleration is due to antislavery tornadoes “scourging before them the lazy elements which but for them would have stagnated into pestilence”? Adams thanked God in Congress that, at last, “the yoke [on free speech] was broken.” Garrison broke a heavier and more cruel yoke. Free speech and broad culture know not to-day the debt they owe him. Dr. Channing thanked the Garrisonians, “in the name of freedom and humanity,” affirming that their intrepidity had saved free speech. “They have rendered to freedom a more essential service than any body of men among us. . . . The first systematic effort to strip the citizen of freedom of speech they have met with invincible resolution. From my heart I thank them. I am myself their debtor.” It is hardly time yet to measure the depth, or estimate the importance to church and college, of that forty years’ agitation. As an intellectual awakening and moral discipline it has only three parallels in history—the age of Vane and Cromwell, Luther’s Reformation, and the establishment of Christianity.

Its milestone among the centuries is simply that it killed chattel slavery. The grave just closed covers him whose hand lifted us to that spasm of half-way justice and insufficient shelter. The black race blesses him that, at any rate, their limbs wear no chain. But he freed master as well as slave. He broke more yokes than those

of the blacks—how many more, the next generation will judge better than we can. After forty years of empty decorum, his movement has made American life earnest. Religion ceases to be mere text and dogma, and red blood runs in our veins. He set in motion forces which will not cease to act until far greater reforms than those he lived to see are accomplished. And, without specially intending it, he was such an iconoclast that only those names of our generation will live which served the slave, or led in the conspiracy against him.

It may sound strange to some, this claim for Mr. Garrison of a profound statesmanship. Men have heard him styled a mere fanatic so long that they are incompetent to judge him fairly. "The phrases men are accustomed," says Goethe, "to repeat incessantly end by becoming convictions, and ossify the organs of intelligence."

The secret of this rare sagacity was that he put himself exactly in the negro's place. He did literally "remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." This oneness with the negro unlocked for him all the secrets of the slavery problem. The motive of most other antislavery leaders was an intellectual conviction. The root of Garrison's principle was in the heart ; and as Madison says, "The heart, after all, is the best logician."

No sophism ever cheated the negro. He *felt*, and needed no argument. Garrison needed none. No ingenious theory, no plausible excuse, no subtle argument from necessity or convenience, ever perplexed him a moment. His heart detected the hollowness at once. The finest compliment ever paid him—because of its unconscious and delicate appreciation of this quality—was the first words Sir Fowell Buxton said to him. On his arrival in London, during his first visit to England, Garrison called and sent up his letters of introduction. Buxton came down to greet him. Stopping suddenly in his approach, he exclaimed, "Why ! Mr. Garrison, I had supposed you were a negro !"

He had known Garrison only through the columns of "The Liberator"; and all his experience with antislavery laborers had never shown him a white man able to identify himself so exactly and completely with the negro.

The lasting freshness and youth of his intellect were as marked as its early maturity. At twenty-three he startled statesmen and made the great classes and interests of society "crash and jostle against each other like mighty vessels in a storm." Afterward, in those long, weary years, when the most zealous were tired, and some lost

hope—in cold district schoolhouses, thinly filled, and those few present persons of little account—all his fellow workers will remember the fresh, genuine, buoyant spirit in which he would come to the platform, kindling a whole audience as if that were his first appeal, the very baptism of his conscience in a new cause. That one heart held hope and youth enough for thousands.

That boy's moral courage, which, poised on his own single conviction of right, was all-sufficient against thirty millions of doubters, was of the same tough fiber with the serene resolve of threescore years and ten, which flung its rebuke on fifty millions of deluded men. This makes the greatness of our loss. No one can supply his place. In these hesitating and timid days the loss of one man of decided opinions, and willing to express them, is very serious. And Mr. Garrison, though old in years, had lost no whit of his strength, while every hour added to his influence. With such clouds over us, what aid, what a shield that brave, clear, wise, and now trusted counsel would be to us! That "finished man," whose death Burke, in his parental agony, so vividly painted, is to us an infinitely greater loss, just recognized and valued as he had come to be.

Patient of labor, his was a life of constant hard work, misunderstood and misrepresented, at his own cost; for he never accepted pay for any service in the reform-field. And so much did this become habitual that, in after-years, when he was called to other platforms, he hesitated long before accepting, and often finally refused the usual fee.

As for fame, in those dreary years there was little probability that the clouds would break away while he lived, or of any fame that his ear would ever drink in. A lofty ambition of course he had: that which seeks to leave the world better than one finds it—a serene faith that no good effort is ever lost, and no great service ever fails finally to be acknowledged. But that which we usually call ambition—the desire for recognition, the claim for acknowledgment or reward—of that he had as little as any man I ever knew. He was unaffectedly indifferent to money and fame. Borne down by calumny, but conscious that he was rendering most important service to his time, and intent on his one object, there was none of Bacon's wistful and tender appeal to "the next age." Indeed, there was rather a grand carelessness whether "the next age" knew anything, or what it thought, of him or his work. Most of our public men take the precaution to strengthen and vindicate themselves with posterity by studied explanations of what they did, and careful col-

lection of all they said. Garrison—"the best abused man of his day"—stooped to no vindication of his life, and left his words to be gathered up, or not, as neglect or loving reverence should choose.

Modest, and without a trace of self-assertion, he was still aware of his strength, as able men usually are. His boyish essays in journalism were so ripe and masterly that shrewd men supposed them written by Timothy Pickering and some of the oldest and keenest men in New England. He must have known that, if he would lay aside every weight and the solemn sense of duty that so heavily burdened him, few competitors could distance him in the race for worldly success. If he could have stooped to the easy conscience, ready time-serving, and lax honor and honesty of our great journalist, Mr. Garrison would readily have won as large success and commanding place as he did; for in personal magnetism, moral courage, eloquent speech, political shrewdness, common sense, and ability to hold a great party together, Mr. Garrison far exceeded him, while in the ability for hard work they were equals. He must have seen the public recognition and wealth that awaited him if he would only quit his great work and come down to meet them.

The character of his eloquence was peculiar. Some have denied that he ever was eloquent. So Hallam doubted whether Luther was eloquent. But, as his own times felt the great German's eloquence in speech and print, Hallam's doubt three hundred years after, in another tongue, may safely be put one side. Multiply the amount of your influence into the character and mood of your hearers, and the result is the measure of your eloquence. Mr. Garrison spoke in every Northern State, and on the other side of the ocean. His audiences held every class, sometimes bare human nature in its rudest form, sometimes the highest culture and coldest conventionalism of the age. Their mood was quiet and deference, or uproar and mob. The subject was odious to most of them. Some hated him beyond expression, others feared him and shrunk from him as the worst of infidels, and others, still, hung on his lightest word. Yet each and all welcomed him always to the platform, and he held them with sovereign mastery. The hearer whose ear was once caught seldom escaped or wished to escape his hold.

He never trifled, made no account of sharp points or minute particulars, was seldom humorous, not often sarcastic, and cared little for studied phrases. Although, to the surprise of most men, probably, there are more epigrammatic and pithy sayings in his speeches—"hits," as Brougham somewhat irreverently calls such

bursts—*mots* which will pass into literature—than can be culled from the orations of Webster.

His tone was that of a grave and serious indictment ; his whole soul freighted his words. Entirely forgetting himself, an intense earnestness melted every one into the hot current of his argument or appeal, and the influence, strong at the moment, haunted the hearer afterward, and was doubled the next day. He was master of a style of singular elevation and dignity. Windham said the younger Pitt “could speak a king’s speech off-hand.” So far as dignity of tone was concerned, Garrison could have done it. No American of our day could state a case, or indite a public document, with more wary circumspection, impressive seriousness, or grave dignity than he could. The “Declaration of Sentiments” by the Convention which formed the American Antislavery Society, and that Society’s statement of its reasons for repudiating the United States Constitution, have a breadth, dignity, and impressive tone such as are found in few, if any, of our state papers since the Revolution, when Dickinson, Jay, Hamilton, and Adams won such emphatic praise from Lord Chatham.

In regard to classes of men his judgment was unerring, “as if a man had inquired at the oracle of God.” Individuals, in general, he read with the sure instinct of a woman. When mistaken, it was often in thinking too well of them. But, like the sturdy old English moralist, indeed, like all men of a hearty and generous nature, there were some friends in whom he would acknowledge no fault, and some opponents in whom he could see no virtues.

He was no ascetic, but enjoyed life in all its forms and relations. He possessed his own soul. It was not possessed by antislavery, or any other reform idea. You could not be in his company an hour without feeling his ability, his original and decided character. But you might see him many times without having slavery, or any other wrong, thrust on your attention.

Like almost all men of large powers and conversant with great interests, his mood was genial and tender. A fearfully hard life had not embittered him in the least. Laughed at and lied about, hated, dragged through the streets with a halter, mobbed and imprisoned, he was neither soured nor vindictive. Serenely he put these things under his feet with quiet indifference, neither “bewailing his hardships nor exulting in his triumphs.”

Though it was as true of him as it ever was of any one that he feared not the face of man, still he was born a gentleman ; his tastes,

manners, bearing, and mood, were of the highest breeding and courtesy. He was at home in every circle, with a dignity that prevented undue familiarity, and made most men recognize his right to lead.

After Mr. Lewis Tappan and himself had been engaged an hour in earnest debate with a slaveholder who did not know them, the Southerner said to Garrison : "If all Northerners were as fair, courteous, and reasonable as yourself, we should not complain. It is madmen like Garrison that offend us."

Another fierce opponent, accidentally in Garrison's company an hour, after his departure asked a bystander the name of the man he had been disputing with, and, on learning it, sat down in tearful shame that he had so long and bitterly abused such a man.

I once saw him in a mixed company, when a clergyman had made a labored excuse for non-interest in the slave question and dissent from his views, lay his hand respectfully on the critic's arm, and his rebuke, "Sir, it is not light you need, but a heart," though apostolic in frankness, was so courteously spoken that the listeners of both sides assented, and the critic himself took no offense.

The time will come when men will name strength, courage, discretion, marvelous sagacity, inexhaustible patience, and a whole-souled devotion to justice and humanity, which never counted the cost, as his foremost qualities. Then the Church, instead of jealously gathering her skirts about her when he is mentioned, will bind his name proudly on her brow, claiming him not only as hers, but as her ripest fruit in this generation—the best, almost the only evidence of her essential Christianity and value.

If a grand purpose—one of incalculable worth and so difficult as to be almost impossible ; unselfish and tireless devotion to it ; rare sagacity in discovering the means to effect it ; commanding influence in compelling aid from reluctant sources ; and complete success, wrung from universal and bitter opposition, without compromising principle, or stooping to accept dishonorable aid—if all this be any evidence of greatness, then surely Mr. Garrison was one of our greatest men. "He will ever be recognized," says one well versed in our times, "as the central and supreme figure in that group of giants which the civil war produced."

Of course he had faults. But I was honored to stand so near him for forty years that some I could not see, and others I have forgotten. As Bolingbroke said of one of Marlborough's defects, "He was so great a man that I forgot he had that weakness."

WENDELL PHILLIPS.